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ABSTRACT

Originally given as a miniseminar at the 1980 annual convention of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, the paper provides an introduction to descriptive-qualitative research methodology as applied to hearing, speech, and language problems. Considered are definition and history of qualitative research; purpose; characteristics (such as the involved participation of the researcher with the phenomena observed); need or justification (its particular applicability to human problems and encounters); approaches (including the use of sensitizing concepts, inference, and researcher involvement); techniques and procedures; and examples. (DB)

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INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: PURPOSE, CHARACTERISTICS, PROCEDURES, EXAMPLES

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This miniseminar is an introduction to descriptive-qualitative research methodology--a methodology for studying, describing, and understanding human meaning, human behavior, and human relationships. The seminar presents an overview of and background for qualitative methodology and explains its purpose, characteristics, and raison d'etre. It focuses on specific methodological approaches, techniques, and procedures. Examples are provided of the investigative use of qualitative methodology in clinical work.

The following summary of the seminar's content is structured by headings; nevertheless, many constructs are discussed in varying ways under different headings. Hopefully, the totality of the discussion is a holistic one.

Overview

Qualitative research refers to those methods that produce descriptive data about phenomena and that attempt to let us see the phenomena as they are seen or experienced by the participants. Qualitative data, as Silverman (1977) indicates, are verbal rather than numerical descriptions of the studied phenomena. Verbal descriptions are less abstract and are closer to the phenomena than numerical descriptions and reports. Such verbal descriptions can provide an understanding of particular phenomena that is superior to the understanding attempted on the basis of quantitative data.

Disciplines in the social sciences recognize the need for and value of qualitative methodology. In sociological research, qualitative methodology can be traced to the nineteenth century (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Bruyn, 1966); and in the field of humanistic psychology, well-known writers such as Maslow (1966) and Van Kaam (1966) have emphasized the need for a qualitative approach to the interrogation of basic human phenomena--their structure and their content. Recent work in psychology suggests a research paradigm that starts with a phenomenological encounter and leads to the formulation of testable hypotheses (Price & Barrell, 1980).

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Purpose

Qualitative research, frequently referred to as field research, has as its purpose a holistic approach to a complex subject and the production of descriptive data about that subject. A basic assumption of qualitative research is that understanding human behavior and experience comes only when we go beyond objective data and seek inter-connections and inner meanings (Bender, 1975). "Human life is qualitatively different from the physical world, and thereby requires a new, qualitatively different methodology of research" (Bender, 1975, p. 35). Qualitative methods allow us to see the personal, developing dimensions of people and their experiences. Qualitative methodology minimizes the reduction, objectification, and distancing of the data without forsaking an organized and systematic examination.

Characteristics

A major characteristic of qualitative methodology is that it provides a way of understanding phenomena that supports experiential knowing and the involved participation of the researcher with the phenomena (Filstead, 1970; Maslow, 1966). Qualitative methodology reflects an understanding of the dialectical relationship between the researcher and the phenomena studied. Such a way of knowing precludes a methodological approach that reifies constructs and seeks facts and causes. Qualitative methodology can be viewed as a methodology for hypothesis-seeking rather than for hypothesis-testing, a methodology that seeks to discover, not prove.

Other characteristics include the use of: (1) sensitizing rather than definitive, operational concepts (Blumer, 1969, 1970; Bruyn, 1966); (2) inferential understanding rather than measurement in identifying and describing data (Blumer, 1969; Combs, Richards & Richards, 1976); (3) a small, carefully selected sample rather than a large, randomly generated one (Bender, 1980); and (4) a teleological rather than causal principle for discussing the findings (Bruyn, 1966), that is, the researcher seeks to understand constitutive components, meanings, interests, and intents. Cause and effect explanations and predictions are not characteristic.

In addition, qualitative methodology provides an open approach to research in that the investigator can, as Bogdan and Taylor (1975, p. 126) point out, "create new methods and new approaches." Thus the researcher is not limited to a few standardized procedures.

Need or Justification

Writers in both sociology and psychology have stressed the need for a perspective and a methodology suited to the study of humans, of human interaction, and of human complexity. For example, Deutscher (1970), a major figure in sociology, indicates that qualitative methodology is more helpful than quantitative in providing an understanding of human inconsistency and of the "messy world" in which we live. Buhler (1971), a major writer in humanistic psychology, discusses the need for a methodological approach that would aid in the understanding of the person as a whole.

The need and justification for the use of descriptive-qualitative methodology in studying humans and human encounters is based in epistemological issues, that is, the nature and origin of knowledge. Value is placed on experiential knowing--insight and understanding are seen as being gained through personal involvement with reality (Buber, 1965a, 1965b; Maslow, 1966). Value is placed on the meaning experiences have for participants. The reality of individual and shared perspective and meaning is acknowledged. A dialectical perspective is taken toward phenomena: individuals influence and are influenced by the world. Reality is not purely structural; it is in process and is dynamic (Berger & Luckman 1967; Van Kaam, 1966).

Our discipline of speech-language pathology/audiology is cognizant of the need for and value of qualitative data especially in reporting clinical case studies. Nevertheless, a paucity exists in our field regarding research studies that qualitatively describe aspects of the human element in our strategies and processes for communicative change, for clinical supervision, and for family counseling. Our profession is frequently referred to as an "applied behavioral science" (Perkins, 1977) and rightly so; in addition, however, we are professionals, who, as Peters (1977) stated,

> are well aware of the human encounter as a basic principle of the total clinical process. We have neither the right nor the intention to ignore it.

It becomes imperative in our work that we understand as much as we can about the varieties and complexities of human behavior and meaning. One way to do this is through the use of a research methodology that allows for the study of the intricacies, ambiguities, and uniquenesses of human experience.

Approaches

How are phenomena approached in descriptive-qualitative studies? Three basic ways are through (1) the use of sensitizing concepts, (2) the use of inference, and (3) the involved participation of the researcher.

Blumer (1969) refers to concepts as scientific tools that introduce an orientation and make possible new experience. Concepts sensitize one's perspective and help one to respond to the environment at hand. Sensitizing concepts give one a general sense of what to look for, disallow precise identification of a specific instance, are not prescriptions of what to see, and evolve over time. The use of sensitizing concepts enables the investigator to move from the concept itself to the concreteness of the instance and back again (Blumer, 1970), thus providing a dialectical relationship between the concepts and the phenomena.

Concerning inferences, the researcher must accept that they will be made. Sociologist Blumer (1969, p. 179) states "even the observation or designation of a physical act is in the nature of a judgment or an inference." In a qualitative approach, the researcher must base inferences in the phenomena studied, in their relationship to the sensitizing concepts, and in their relationship to the evolving, total configuration (Bender, 1975). Furthermore, the level of inference must be low. Motivational or cause-and-effect inferences

must be avoided. One also must consider the validity of the inference and develop verification procedures that will minimize the force of any potential distortions.

Qualitative research uses the researcher as a participant in varying degrees, depending on the techniques and procedures used. In participant observation, the researcher actually lives the role or life being researched--whether it is in a tribal society or in a mental hospital. In phenomenological research, one attempts to achieve empathic understanding of the meaning an experience or set of experiences has for another person. The phenomenologist attempts to see the other's experiences and meanings from that person's point of view.

The researcher, no matter the specific technique, is his/her own instrument for interpretation, understanding, and meaning-building (Bender, 1975). The researcher will use specific tools, including the concepts and rubrics of the discipline and of the phenomena studied. Nevertheless, one does get involved, does interpret parts vis-à-vis the whole, and does attempt to understand the whole on the basis of the meaning of the parts. The researcher goes back and forth in a dialectical relationship with the phenomena and with the data. The process of the researcher's critical inquiry is a constituent of the total research.

Techniques and Procedures

Field or qualitative research uses a variety of techniques to study complex social phenomena (McCall & Simmons, 1969, p. 5), including the traditional ones of participant observation, direct observation, structured and unstructured interviewing, use of audio and videotapes, and use of personal and public documents. Furthermore, less traditional techniques may be developed and used or several techniques combined.

Specific procedures include developing the sensitizing concepts, identifying or developing a paradigm for inferential analysis, and developing verification procedures. Other procedural elements include design specifics, plans for organizing the data, and the a priori expectations or presuppositions of the researcher. This latter element is particularly important since the researcher will become involved with the data and will be making inferences; thus, to the extent and depth possible, the researcher should articulate expectations or anticipations concerning the findings.

Issues of rigor, systemacy, and verification are important ones in any kind of research. Bender (1975) discusses the need for observing a set of interpretative rules--a hermeneutics--in qualitative research in order to provide structure, systemacy, and boundaries. Bruyn (1966) has developed criteria for assessing both the subjective and objective adequacy of the researcher in participant observation. Such criteria help speak to issues of reliability and validity in one's methodology and findings.

Although qualitative data can be organized and reported in a variety of ways, the two basic ones appear to be a tabular format and a narrative style (Silverman, 1977). One approach does not preclude the other and, in fact, may complement the other. All formats for reporting data have in common a descriptive and analytic presentation of data that have been systematically collected

and interpreted (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). In reporting findings, in addition to presenting the data, the writer may discuss constitutive components, themes, patterns, and suggested hypotheses. Theoretical considerations arising from the data also may be discussed, as may be the relationship of the data to assumptions and theories current in the literature; varying levels of descriptive comparison thus may be included in the report. Certainly in reporting data, one should explain methods, researcher-subject relationships, and verification procedures. More specific guidelines for reporting data are available in the sociological literature; see, for example, Bogdan & Taylor (1975).

Examples

As Silverman (1977) points out, qualitative data have been used by speech-language pathologists and audiologists most frequently in clinical case studies. An example of a case study reported in our literature shows how information about a client with unique speech-language functioning is presented in a descriptive and analytic way (Weiner, 1974). The discussion of the case poses questions suggested by the findings and, furthermore, links the case-specific findings to discussions, studies, and theories reported in the literature.

First-hand personal accounts are another kind of qualitative data, and an example from our literature is presented (Sies & Butler, 1963). In addition to the personal account of the client, this study contains background information, caveats on the use of single case reports, tentative subjective conclusions, and hypotheses for empirical investigation.

A third example, a phenomenological study of supervision in counselor education, used interviewing and drawings to gather data about the feelings and experiences of twelve individuals in the dual role of psychotherapist and supervisor (Cole, 1978).

A last example comes from the presenter's research on interpersonal communication in supervisory and therapeutic relationships in speech-language clinical practicum (Pickering, 1979). The study reports an analysis of verbatim transcripts of supervisory conferences and therapy sessions. Sensitizing concepts derived from the field of interpersonal communication were used; findings were organized on the basis of these concepts plus others that emerged during the study; the findings were organized, summarized, and reported in narrative form. Caveats to the methodology and design are identified.

Other examples, taken primarily from the communication disorder literature, are listed in the bibliography. Several of the studies are qualitative only in part, that is, they also contain quantitative characteristics. Furthermore, most of the studies deal only with observable behaviors or characteristics, not with an individual's experience of the behaviors. Such studies are not phenomenological in nature. Studies that are more completely representative of qualitative methodology, especially through the use of participant observation, personal documents, and unstructured interviewing, can be found in the sociological literature.

Conclusion

We do research--critical inquiry--to increase and improve our information, our knowledge about aspects of our work, our lives. Various paradigms exist for research. Each paradigm is based on a distinctive epistemology and employs a different set of approaches, techniques, and procedures. Descriptive-qualitative methodology allows the researcher to probe personal meanings (Blumer, 1969), individual approaches to experience (Maslow, 1966), and human issues in their relational and individual complexity and ambiguity (Giorgi, 1970). Such methodology has an important place in a discipline in which the human experience and the human encounter are central.

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